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Intellectuals

Posted by [Toby Miller / University of California, Riverside](#) on March 13th, 2008 [1 Comment](#)
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Flow Favorite: Bryan Sebok

Editor's Note: This piece, originally published [here](#) in [Volume 3, Issue 8](#), is reprinted here as part of our "Flow Favorites" issue, in which the coordinating editors (past and present) select an article for republication. While new images and video clips have been added, the original text remains the same. We have also included the original comments at the conclusion, as well as **a new postscript by the author** and an introduction by the co-coordinating editor of volumes [3](#) and [4](#), Bryan Sebok.

Introduction:

Toby Miller's "Intellectuals" is prescient in interrogating the collapse of the fourth estate, the diminished role of the public intellectual in contemporary media and political environments, and the superficial agenda-setting and muck-raking so prevalent in the news media today. Written in 2005, this article could (and perhaps should) be interpreted as a meta-commentary on the academic's responsibilities and limitations in the public sphere. For the academic to be a viable commentator and contributor, she must de-contextualize and de-historicize the event of the day, churning complex developments into simple narrative snippets ready-made for mass consumption. With the current 24 hour election "news" cycle recently focused on the missteps of public academics within democratic campaigns (from Harvard Professor Samantha Power's now infamous comments re: Hillary Clinton to University of Chicago economist Austan Goolsbee and Harvard Professors Jeffrey Liebman and David Cutler embroiled in a Canadian NAFTA snafu), it appears only a matter of time before the public academic is stripped of its "public" moniker, relegated to the policy sidelines as the cycle churns out another "breaking news" story of sexual perversion, corruption, and hypocrisy.

– Bryan Seabok, 2008

INTELLECTUALS

"I do not advocate that we turn television into a 27-inch wailing wall, where longhairs constantly

moan about the state of culture and our defense.”

—Edward R Murrow (1958)

“It is all in the grand tradition of American anti-intellectualism: the suspicion of thought, of words. And it very much serves the purposes of the present administration. Hiding behind the humbug that the attack of last 11 September was too horrible, too devastating, too painful, too tragic for words — that words could not possibly do justice to our grief and indignation — our leaders have a perfect excuse to drape themselves in borrowed words of contempt.”

—Susan Sontag (2002)

Outside the pedagogical tasks of babysitting (high school), transitioning (college), re-infantilizing (graduate school), and hegemonizing (professional training for business, the law, and medicine), intellectuals have two roles in US public life. The first is to be technocrats, providing solutions to problems that will make money or allow governments to achieve policy targets. The second is to offer cultural critique and political intelligence to the élite, both inside and outside the state. Sometimes it appears as though critical public intellectuals in the US are, in the words of the Economist, ‘a tiny, struggling species, whose habitat is confined to a few uptown apartments in New York and the faculties of certain universities’ (“Susan” 2005).

Neoliberals and conservatives utilize the media spectacularly. Policy proposals are left up to their corporate masters, because right-wing media discourse does not undertake rational analyses aimed at technocratic outcomes. Instead, it works via a blend of grass-roots religious superstition and public outreach that stresses column inches and shouted seconds, not professional expertise (Kallick 2002). Funded by some of the wealthiest US foundations and families, such as Olin, Scaife, Koch, Castle Rock, and Smith Richardson, there are over three hundred right-wing ‘coin-operated’ think-tanks in Washington, dealing with topics from sexuality to foreign policy. They hire ghost-writers to make their resident intellectuals’ prose attractive — a project to market opinion, rather than to conduct research. Each “study” they fund is essentially the alibi for an op-ed piece. The corollary numbers for media coverage are striking. Progressive think-tanks had a sixth share of media quotation compared to reactionary institutions during the 1990s. In the decade to 2005, reactionaries averaged 51% of citations and progressives 14%; journalists even call the supposedly independent Heritage Foundation when the White House has no-one available. If we believe in market-based rhetoric, then the people who appear on the major three TV networks’ newscasts as experts should be indices of consumer desire; in which case, the public “wants” 92% of these mavens to be white, 90% born between 1945 and 1960, 85% male, and 75% Republican. That might expose us to the cohort that is responsible for our troubles, but not to disinterested critique (Karr 2005; Alterman 2003: 85; Dolny 2003 and 2005; Hart 2005: 52; Claussen 2004: 56; Love 2003: 246; Cohen 2005).

Media attention does not correlate with scholarly esteem or achievement, and the academics most likely to be interviewed have worked in government. These public intellectuals are general rather than specific in their remarks, and disdainful of both theory and fact — an unusual combination. They have displaced expertise and journalism with position-taking. It can be no accident that Fox News Channel, which employs few journalists and foreign *bureaux*, has the most pundits on its payroll of any US network — over fifty in 2003 (Tugend 2003). Margaret Carlson, a correspondent for *Time* and one of CNN’s vocalists, explained the key qualifications

for her television work in these damning words: 'The less you know about something, the better off you are ... sound learned without confusing the matter with too much knowledge' (quoted in Alterman 2003: 32).

The system bespeaks the right's success at culture capture. This taps into a rich vein of anti-intellectualism that derives from creepy Christianity, populism, and instrumentalism. It dates back to newspaper assaults on John Quincy Adams for 'book learning' and Adlai Stevenson as effeminate (Claussen 2004: 18-21, 40-41). There is minimal room for intellection on network television, as the still-extant mass audience is the target, and is assumed to despise universities. So few if any professional academicians appear on air to explain the history of US foreign policy, despite the country's relationships with oil interests, arms manufacturers, and despots to keep oil prices low; its complex twists and turns supporting and undermining various brands of Islam and Arab rule; and its bizarre insistence on an ethical reputation, while essentially rejecting international law other than over copyright. Nor do we see consistently competent contextualization of the hypocrisies and horrors of its opponents. Instead, a jingoistic and spiritual message comes through, juxtaposing freedom and decency with repression and fanaticism in a way that always seems to break down the binary rather disturbingly, and heightens a sense of risk without explaining it other than via the clash twins. *E pluribus unum* is part of the networks' discourse, but it is applied as a loyalty test, where talking in a way that is counter to the Administration is equated with lack of professional objectivity, and the unity of the nation is embodied in military action, seemingly the last legitimate government arena.

Ibrahim Al-Marashi was unusual — a critical Arab intellectual able to enter the lists of such discussions. He was ushered in because his work had been plagiarized by a British intelligence dossier that Colin Powell formally presented to the Security Council in 2003. Al-Marashi (2004) hoped to use this as a platform to differentiate himself from on-air Iraqi-Americans, who were calling for invasion and destruction. But of the hundreds of interviews he gave, virtually none presented the opportunity for commentary on the war. He was restricted to the discourse of secreted weaponry. Not surprisingly, my search through Lexis-Nexis found that Edward Said's by-line did not appear in any US newspaper in the 18 months after September 11, finally reemerging in July 2003 (Said 2003). By contrast, subscribers to the *Independent*, *El País*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, *Rebelión.org*, and the *Weekend Australian* had the opportunity to read him during this period.

Academics are sometimes excluded through direct political action rather than deregulatory pressures, popular-cultural obsessions, ignorance, or jingoism. For example, the right-wing think-tanks that dominate Washington policy on the Middle East have sought to discredit area studies across US universities, especially Middle-Eastern programs. The Washington Institute for Near East Studies is the key front organization for the Republican Party, while institutions like the American Jewish Congress, Campus Watch, and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (run by the Vice-President's wife) warn against 'Middle Eastern Arabs' in universities, and place conservatives in vital opinion-making fora that feed into TV current affairs, such as the op-ed pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Jerusalem Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* (Beinin 2003 135; Whitaker 2002; Brynen 2002; Davidson 2002; Abrahamian 2003; Merriman 2004).

Away from the live media, the Arab world has been chided for being closed to ideas from the outside, as measured by the fact that only 330 books are translated from foreign languages

annually. But the US, with an almost equal population and a vastly bigger book trade, translates the same number! The comparison of these two regions with the rest of the world is highly unflattering on this score. Still, with books can come knowledge, and something must be done about that. Attorney-General John Ashcroft recognized their importance when he interpreted the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act (USA PATRIOT Act) to permit FBI scrutiny of book-buying and borrowing — but not fire-arm purchase (Dilday 2003; Grieve 2003).

Meanwhile, the government establishes front organizations to select, train, and promote apparently independent figures. The State Department financed the Iraq Public Diplomacy Group, which coached Iraqis to appear on US television in support of positions prepared for them, on the grounds that they would be more effective than Yanquis. The Iraqi National Congress was the creation and creature of the CIA, via the Agency's public-relations consultant, the Rendon Group, whose motto reads 'information as an element of power.' Its advertised services run the gamut from generating 'a favorable environment before privatization begins' to providing alibis for state violence. It coordinated propaganda for the 1989 invasion of Panama and the 1991 Gulf War, and has received more than US\$100 million from the CIA (Alterman 2003: 82-83; Rampton and Stauber 2003: 55, 43; Downing and Husband 2005: 73; Chatterjee, 2004).

The press should be interviewing intellectuals trained in area studies, military strategy, international law, business ethics, and battlefield medicine. But that would provide media coverage that was multi-perspectival. Instead, the paranoid form of reporting favored by US networks militates against journalistic autonomy, other than when the information comes directly from battlefields and is a "soldier's story" — or derives from the Pentagon or the Israeli government (Fisk, 2003). The prevailing doctrines of regulation favor a small number of large entities that appeal to anti-intellectualism, regardless of their niches. Scott Adams' comic-strip Dilbert (*Los Angeles Times*, August 21 2005) parodies this beautifully via the fictitious 'Dogbert Easy News Channel.' Easy News provides 'all the news that's easy to gather' and features 'a debate between two middle-aged white guys' about why '[p]eople in other countries want to kill us.' One of the guests says it's because 'we are so wonderful.' The other warns '[b]uy my book or you will all die.'

I have some limited experience of these tendencies. I worked for many years in Australian radio, and later as an academic commentator on popular culture. On coming to the US, I was interviewed fairly regularly across the media, I suppose because I was at NYU and had a plausibly English accent. Just days before September 11, I appeared on CNN International to talk about a crisis involving Afghan refugees in peril off the Australian coast. At the time, CNN had 23 satellites, 42 *bureaux*, and 150 foreign correspondents. But you'd never know it from watching the network's parochial domestic stations, with their blinking, winking, walking-dead presenters, for all the world propped up by formaldehyde and dedicated to eastern-seaboard storms, missing white children, and entertainment news. The day I was interviewed, most of the workers at CNN in New York were tuned to CNN International, which actually covers news stories, as opposed to the network's laughable domestic programs. Even so, during the interview, the anchorman looked at me disbelievingly as I listed the history of racialization by successive Australian administrations. He asked incredulously 'So are you telling us that the Australian Government is racist?' — another sign of the deluded faith in official sources that dogs contemporary Yanqui journalism's 'stenographic reporting' (Moeller 2004: 71).

When I appeared on New York 1, a local cable news channel, shortly after the attacks on the US, I was asked to comment on the psychology of terrorists in a trans-historical way: What makes people do these things? Are they maladjusted? I endeavored to direct the conversation towards US foreign policy and its support of totalitarian regimes in the Middle East that restricted access to politics, hence turning religion into a zone of resistance. And I spoke of US TV journalists' sparse and prejudicial narrative frames and background knowledge. The production staff later told me that the board lit up with supportive reaction when the program accepted phone calls from the public, and those I spoke with thanked me for saying the *non dit*. The staff said I would be invited back (but they may say that to all the boys). I was not. Station management eventually acknowledged that most of its coverage at the height of the crisis had not been 'analytical,' because the attack was 'an open, gaping wound' (quoted in Boehlert, 2002). By contrast, when Radio Scotland came to town and interviewed a stand-up-comedy venue owner, a media consultant, and myself about cultural reactions to these events, we were not dealing with overdetermined presuppositions from our questioners. There was time for me to draw on theory and history to complement their approaches. The same thing happened when I was interviewed on All-India Radio in Delhi. But when CBS News contacted me in 2005 to discuss George Bush Minor's admission that he had instructed the National Security Agency to spy on US citizens sans judicial review, contra the law, something quite different occurred. The producer first asked me if I could contextualize this in terms of the history of the media during wartime. I replied that I could. He then asked me about the limits to publicizing information, and I indicated that whilst most critics would agree that the precise timing and location of an event such as D-Day could legitimately be kept secret, extra-judicial contravention of civil liberties would generally be considered another matter. The producer thanked me for my time, and noted that my services would not be required. He already had a lawyer to support the revelation, and needed someone who would attack the *New York Times* for having broken the story and forced Bush to tell the truth. He had not wanted the history of the media during wartime. He had wanted a nationalist, opposed to civil liberties.

Postscript: Toby Miller

In re-reading the paper, these things came to mind. First, it became part of a book (Miller 2007). Second, by "the Clash Twins," I was referring, elliptically, to Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, who achieved immense media attention with their theories of the clash of civilizations. I wrote about them in the book, and a radio broadcast (Miller 2006). Next, I'd like to underscore the need for—hope! The media-reform movement has been a spectacular success in raising public consciousness about the state of US television through freepress.net. And Al Jazeera English is available—not on cable or satellite, but via [realPlayer](http://realplayer.com). It offers the best news and current affairs I have seen, and interviews intellectuals all the time—on everything from women in the Arab street to US media ownership. Finally, we have a new book about an outstanding example of *maîtres à penser* on TV (Chaplin 2007). Hope!

– Toby Miller, 2008

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Reprint Image Credits

1. **Television News Set**. Graphic by Peter Alilunas.
2. **CNN International Anchor Desk**. Graphic by Peter Alilunas.

Original Comments

First off, nice article! It sounds like you ran into the a number of things including the "we-need-two-sides-of-a-story" trope that is the staple of American Journalism. Somehow this has been elevated above and beyond depth and history and it is convenient since depth and history take time and time is American TVs primary commodity: it sells exposure time and trades in audience numbers.

I wonder what would have been the reporters reaction to the story had you told him that

executives such as Wilson had created committees at war time to expressly limit information and mold information simply to curry public opinion, which is what Bush was clearly doing by asking the NYT not to report it. Somehow I believe that the terrorists know we are spying on them already. Isn't that why they speak in code? There will always be nationalists who defer to strong executives because they prefer quick action, whether it be wrong or right, to democracy. Bush avoiding the judicial system is essentially his declaration that he is either above the law or is the law. And his attempt to silence the NYT is his desire to squelch any conversation, see democratic debate, about his assumption. In a democracy you not only use intellectuals but you try to grow an enlightened, deliberative society which, quite honestly, is the last thing this administration wants.

Posted by Tim Anderson | January 11, 2006, 8:41 pm | [edit](#)

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- **John Donovan** said:



In many ways, the PBS series *Bill Moyers Journal* is exactly the kind of political media that Miller desperately longs for. It resurrects the withering branch of public affairs programming rooted in "intellection", i.e. in rational monologues rather than emotional banter. It honors words over images, and takes the time to discuss issues in depth and with nuance. It provides a platform for intellectuals to practice their historically important roles as problem-solving technocrats, cultural critics, and elite educators. Ideologically, the series serves to counter the dominance in the mainstream media of corporate

spokespersons, government officials, and conservative pundits.

But, in other ways, *Bill Moyers Journal* (BMJ) is not exactly what Miller wants. For example, Miller bemoans the homogeneity of the experts featured on network news. Unfortunately, the guests on BMJ are only slightly more diverse than those found elsewhere in the news media—which is to say, hardly diverse at all. Sure, they are liberal, sometimes women, and even sometimes African-American. These are all improvements, believe it or not. But Moyers' guests are also uniformly well-educated (many are professors or college administrators), upper middle class, and in their 50's and 60's. They represent what Robert Bellah described (in *Habits of the Heart*, xii) as “a deracinated elite composed of those Robert Reich calls ‘symbolic analysts,’ that is, people who know how to use the new technologies and information systems that are transforming the global economy. Such people are located less securely in communities than in networks linking them, flexibly and transiently, to others like themselves who are scattered all over the world.”

Aesthetically and structurally, the series seems stuck in a format that is decades old. In contrast, *NOW*, the series that was Moyers' home before spinning off BMJ, makes a valiant attempt to place liberal ideologies in a contemporary broadcast aesthetic wrapper. The unfortunate result is that its “old school” look virtually guarantees that BMJ will only appeal to viewers of Moyers' generation, and symbolically suggests that the views espoused are similarly outdated.

More crucially, the series uniformly expresses liberal political perspectives. While Toby Miller might share those views and appreciate the series' value in offsetting other politically conservative TV programs, he would also recognize that this bias serves to brand the show as “liberal clap-trap”, diminishing its aura of expertise, audience diversity, and ultimately its educative potential. As a result, while the series may aspire to be rational, its reception becomes emotional. Moyers' frequent use of colorful and politicized colloquialisms in his segment introductions only furthers the effect. In addition, although these introductions are intended to heighten the narrative drama and align Moyers with his audiences, they actually polarizes the audience instead. They resemble nothing more than the op-eds disguised as think-tank research which Miller so despises.

-April 27th, 2009 at 7:58 pm